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Rock the Canal! A history of cultural life in the canal area of Brussels

*Rock the Canal! Contribution à l'histoire de la vie culturelle dans le territoire
du canal à Bruxelles*

*Rock the Canal! Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van het cultureel leven in de
Brusselse kanaalzone*

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Rock the Canal!

A history of cultural life in the canal area of Brussels

Translation: Jane Corrigan

Since the end of the 1970s, the canal area in Brussels has been an innovative setting for avant-gardist artistic creation in the area of non-traditional music, contemporary dance, theatre research and multidisciplinary and digital performances. Cultural operators have found affordable real estate there due to deindustrialisation and late and relatively slow residential gentrification. This article is aimed at identifying the key stages in the development of alternative culture in the canal area, within and especially outside recognised and subsidised institutions. It is based on the hypothesis that the artists and this unique area have had a mutual influence on each other. On the one hand, the area has enhanced artistic creation with its strong characteristics: urbanity, deindustrialisation and cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, the presence of cultural activities has attracted a public which has rarely been there, thus participating in the partial reconstruction of its image.

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Video 1. cultural venues dedicated to the performing arts in the canal area, today. Videos associated with this publication, which are inserted into the ePub version of the text, but can also be seen online <http://vimeo.com/channels/BruS>

Many photos, posters, flyers and maps are available at <http://rockthecanal.tumblr.com/>

Introduction

1. Since the 1970s, the canal area in Brussels¹ has been the setting for innovative artistic creation in the area of non-traditional music, contemporary dance, experimental theatre and multidisciplinary and digital performances. The post-1968 intellectual proliferation and the thirst for artistic exploration, intersecting disciplines, discourses and audiences led to the appearance of a significant number of cultural initiatives in Brussels. The areas near the canal were ideal: deindustrialisation as well as late and relatively slow residential gentrification had kept real estate prices low for a long time. From the end of the 1970s, the avant-gardist operators or groups of operators joined forces there, in particular via the organisation of festivals, thus creating a very dynamic bi-communal cultural network which is still strong today.

2. This article is aimed at identifying the key stages in the development of alternative music culture in the canal area, within and especially outside recognised and subsidised institutions. It is based on the hypothesis that the artists and this unique area have had a mutual influence on each other. On the one hand, the area has enhanced artistic creation (and even the existing institutions) with its strong characteristics: urbanity, deindustrialisation and cosmopolitanism. On the other

hand, the presence of cultural activities has attracted a public which would never have 'crossed the canal', thus participating in the partial reconstruction of its image.

3. A systematic inventory has been made of cultural venues located in the canal area, with an essentially public and artistic vocation from the mid 1970s onwards. This inventory is based on a variety of sources which validate each other mutually: personal memories, operators' reports, cultural agendas, critiques, newspaper articles, institution web-sites, posters, flyers, concert tickets and field visits. The use of multiple sources has allowed the information about the artistic events to be verified (names and addresses of the venues, the key dates in their history, the operators, the artistic disciplines and the sources of funding).

4. In this context, private artists' workshops, community places and cafés with live music have not been included in the inventory, although they have certainly participated extensively in the dynamics of the performing arts. In particular, Boulevard d'Anvers, between Porte d'Anvers and the canal, was a Mecca of popular culture in Brussels: large cafés accommodating 'big bands', cinemas, theatres,² etc. There was even a big Luna Park (where La Luna theatre was built in 1932). These cultural venues were very active before World War II and gradually disappeared, in particular because jazz was replaced by rock and roll and the venues were ill-suited to this new musical genre. The urbanistic and social disintegration caused by the 'Manhattan' project also contributed to this disappearance. More recently, in the 1990s, another cluster of bars opened around the Beursschouwburg (such as Le Bizon and L'Archiduc), contributing to the cultural life of the Saint-Géry/Dansaert neighbourhood.

¹ The term 'canal area' includes all of the neighbourhoods along the Willebroeck-Charleroi canal, which runs through the Brussels Region. The perimeter corresponds to the boundaries of the Canal Master Plan elaborated by the Brussels-Capital Region. It goes eastwards in the Pentagon area to the Bourse, and westwards to the West Station.

² Interview with Jari Demeulemeester by Jan Ackenhaussen (ADT), February 2014. Jari Demeulemeester has worked in the Brussels cultural world since the beginning of the 1970s: he started as consultant at the *Contact & cultuurcentrum*; he worked at the *Beursschouwburg* (1972-1974) before becoming artistic director (1974); he created the *Mallemunt* festival, participated in the creation of the *Kaaitheater* festival and was director of the *Ancienne Belgique* from 1989 to 2011.

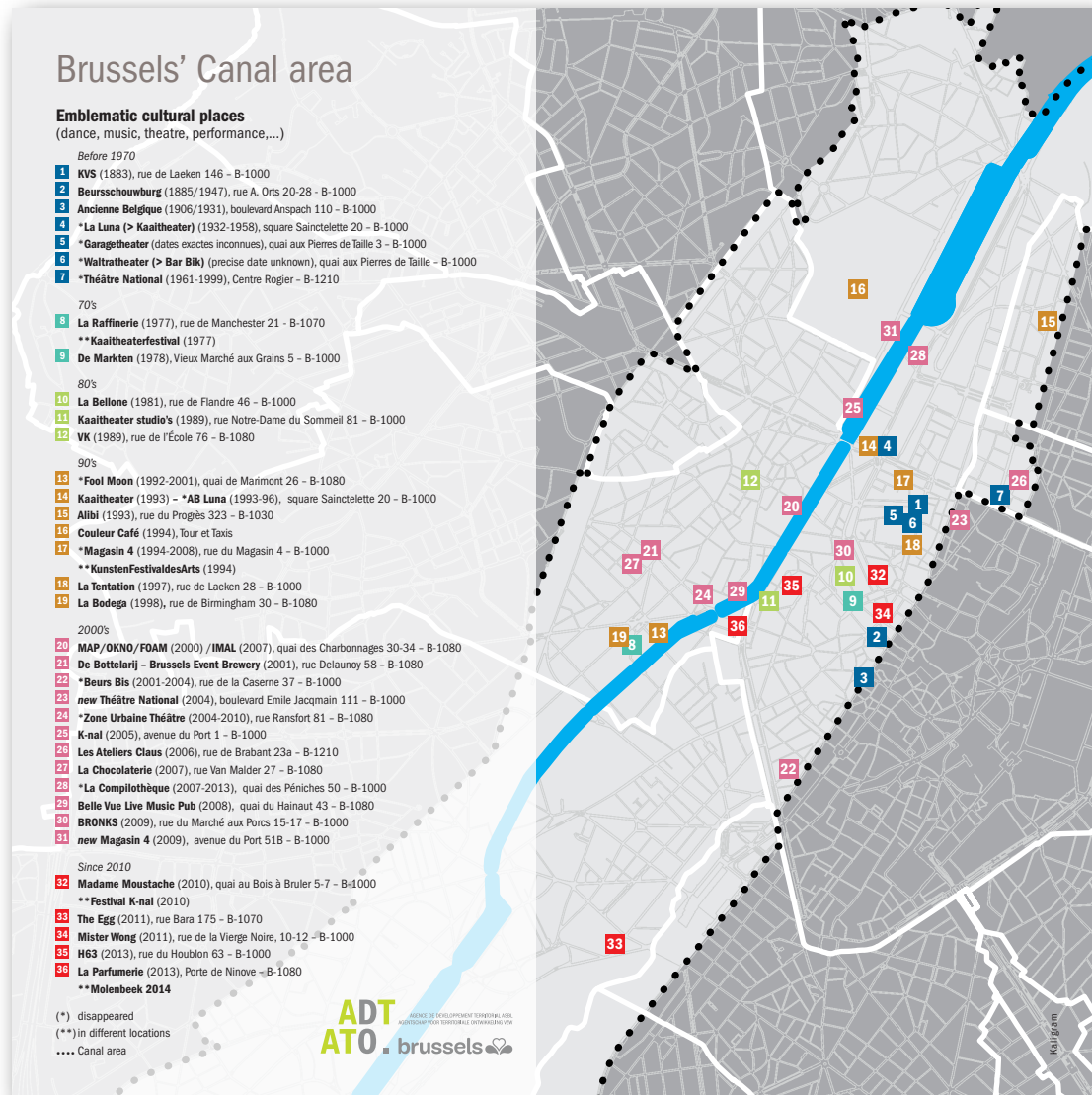


Figure 1. Map of cultural venues dedicated to the performing arts in the canal area.

5. Note that the transformation of the canal area has been discussed widely from an urbanistic, historical and sociological point of view, in both an academic framework [De Beule, 1994; Deligne, 2005; Van Criekeingen, 2006; Demey, 2008] and in the framework of Contrats de quartier or Plan canal cases. However, cultural activity in this area has been mentioned little in academic literature, with the exception of the recent article by Tatiana Debroux [2013] regarding visual artists.

1. The canal area: between barrier and opportunities

6. Since the 16th and especially the 19th century, the canal area, which is located in the valley of the River Senne, has been the preferred area for the development of transport infrastructures as well as industrial and port activities [Demey, 2008]. Following its deindustrialisation, this area was faced with a number of socioeconomic difficulties: wasteland, old and poorly maintained housing from the residual rental sector [Vandermotten, 1999, p. 136] and a relatively disadvantaged population established in the area due to this segment of the housing market. What sociologists and geographers refer to as the 'Croissant pauvre' (the 'poor area') is therefore the legacy of this industrial past. Due to the functioning of the housing market in particular, the past is echoed in a high unemployment rate especially among young people, low qualification levels, uncertain labour market integration, low income, etc. [Kesteloot and Van der Haegen, 1997].

7. The canal area has therefore always had a deplorable image. With the working-class population being joined by a wave of immigrants after World War II, the neighbourhoods along the canal in Cureghem, Molenbeek and Laeken were discredited or at best ignored, and were therefore abandoned by the dominant classes, who mainly lived 'on the other side of the canal', in the municipalities to the south and east of the region. The canal was therefore a true intra-urban boundary separating two worlds. This is what artist Emilio Lopez-Menchero wished to symbolise with his 2010 installation of a replica of 'Checkpoint Charlie' in Berlin, on a bridge over the canal at Porte de Flandre, where the very trendy Rue Antoine Dansaert meets the working-class Chaussée de Gand and its Moroccan shops.

8. Today, the canal area is experiencing major changes. It has received much attention from the public authorities since the beginning of the 1990s, through various 'urban regeneration' plans of action [SRDU, 2007]. Since then, in particular following the increase in real estate prices throughout the region, there has been renewed interest in the central neighbourhoods and the canal area on behalf of middle- and upper-class young households – generally with a high level of education – wishing to become homeowners and unable to find urban housing elsewhere within their budget. And more recently, the area has been targeted by private real estate investors, with some of them depicting it as the exciting new heart of the city.³



Figure 2. 'Checkpoint Charlie', bridge over the canal, 2010 urban action.
Source: © Emilio López-Menchero.

9. With respect to culture, one may suggest the hypothesis that during the 1970s, 80s and 90s, the only motivation for the young trendy middle class from the southeast neighbourhoods of the region to cross the canal was a curiosity for the alternative culture which was developing there. The post-war deindustrialisation of the canal area had a positive aspect for the artistic world: huge spaces – often well lit and suitable for deliveries, workshops, sets, etc. – had become available at affordable rental rates.

10. During the past 30 years, the revitalisation of neighbourhoods near the canal has been accompanied by a 'westward shift' of visual artists, in particular to the west of the Pentagon area, due to the central location and economic accessibility of these areas [Debroux, 2013]. At the same time, spaces for the creation and/or diffusion of visual art in the broad sense have appeared: galleries, artists' squats (such as those run by the Moving Art Studio association), 'museums' (such as the Plasticarium in Rue de Locquenghien) and various other institutions (Bains connectives in Forest, Comptoir du Nylon, Centrale électrique, etc.).

11. Likewise, pioneering clubs presenting non-classic music (rock, punk, jazz, rap, electronica, funk, world and folk) also moved into immense abandoned industrial spaces. The crude aspect of the recovered spaces helped create the special atmospheres which helped build the legend of some of these places. However, due to the fact that these venues were not designed for loud music, the acoustics left much to be desired at times.

³ See 'Donnons du sens à la ville', published by the property developer Atenor Group in issue no. 4 of the magazine 'Diversity', April 2013. Available at http://fr.atenor.be/divercity/ATENOR_Diversity_4_FR.pdf

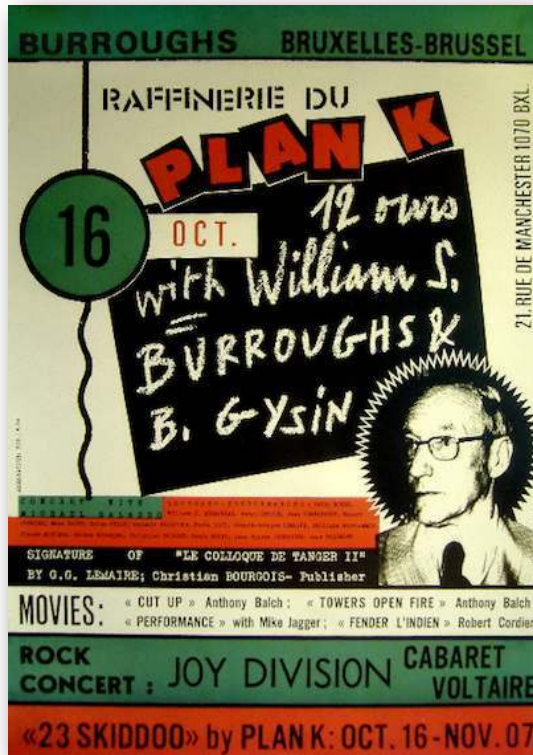


Figure 3. Encounter with William Burroughs at Raffinerie du Plan K, 16 October 1979. Source: www.realitystudio.org.

2. From factories to 'The Factory'

12. The former Raffinerie Graeffe in Rue de Manchester in Molenbeek was one of the first factories to be converted into a cultural venue. Founded in 1850, this sugar refinery (where the famous brown sugar was made) employed more than 2000 workers. After being used for some time as a paint warehouse, the refinery ceased to be used for industrial activities in 1958 [Prouvost, 1994]. In 1977, after 20 years of neglect, the building fell into the hands of Plan K theatre company, directed by Frédéric Flamand. The building was fitted out as a rudimentary (no heating, so the winter evenings were cold) theatre, cinema and dance studio [Degan, 1992]. The huge building had five floors, with vast open spaces and innumerable rooms with lines of cast iron columns, providing interesting spaces for an eclectic programme oriented towards avant-gardist creation. The evening of 16 October 1979, which was organised on the occasion of American writer William Burroughs' – the emblematic figure of the Beat Generation⁴ – visit to Brussels, left quite an im-

pression. The music set was programmed by journalists Michel Duval and Annik Honoré, and included the group Joy Division in particular. The performance of the Mancunian post-punk division⁵ (who returned in 1980), marked the beginning of a long love affair between Plan K and one of the most famous British record labels of the 1980s: Tony Wilson's Factory Records. Duval and Honoré created the Factory Benelux label with Wilson [Brinkhuis, 2008]. For 10 years, famous and emerging post-punk, new wave and avant-gardist artists performed at the Raffinerie, such as the bands

Cabaret Voltaire, Echo and the Bunnymen, Human League and Eurythmics, American stage director Bob Wilson, dancers and choreographers Philippe Decouflé and Pierre Droulers, as well as musician Michael Nyman.

13. But even alternative culture was eventually institutionalised. This was an essential move in order to save the building, which was falling into ruin, and to ensure the continuation of activities. In 1992, Frédéric Flamand was appointed director of the Centre chorégraphique de la Communauté française, renamed Charleroi/Danses. In 1994, the Raffinerie received 70 million Belgian francs for renovations and organisational development, as well as for choreographers in residence (such as Michèle Anne de Mey, who later became director of Charleroi/Danses), as part of what the minister for culture at the time referred to as a 'Maison de la Danse' [Prouvost, 1994]. And dance was seen in all its forms, from parties with DJs organised by the contemporary music festival Ars Musica, to big 'gay/straight friendly' parties organised by Next.



Figure 4. Echo and the Bunnymen concert, 26 January 1980, Raffinerie du Plan K. Source: © Philippe Carly.

⁴ Regarding the influence of William Burroughs on Ian Curtis and their meeting at Plan K <http://realitystudio.org/biography/william-s-burroughs-and-joy-division/>

⁵ On YouTube, the Joy Division performance on 16 October 1979 at Plan K; a film by Michel Isbecque <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q27CRlcljBk>



Figure 5. concert posters; VK. Source: photography Yves Rouyet.

Baptiste church in Molenbeek. In the afternoon, the senior citizens of Molenbeek play cards, sew or do gymnastics in the concert hall. Excursions, family and extra-curricular activities are organised by a handful of volunteers. But in the evening at the time, people could go there to discover Blur, Suede, Supergrass, Rage against the Machine, Therapy?, Garbage, The Gossip, etc. The VK benefited from the temporary closing down of the Ancienne Belgique, presenting groups which were already known. Still today, the VK features rock, metal, reggae, dub and rap, wavering between major international groups and niche discoveries.⁷ Depending on the artists' fame, the concerts are sometimes held in neighbouring venues: Beurschouwburg (Rue Orts), Chocolaterie and Belle-Vue Café, Quai du Hainaut.

14. With the Raffinerie becoming a respectable place, those who came after the pioneers from Manchester – the Indie Britpop wave of the 1990s – found other semi-sheds in the beginning. Among these was the VK⁶ (acronym for Vaartkapoen). This small Flemish community centre resembling a church hall, with a bar and a concert hall, is located at 76 Rue de l'Ecole, next to Saint-Jean

15. In October 1992, a few hundred metres up the canal, Quai de Mariemont came to life: the Fool Moon opened its doors at number 26 [Rebuffat, 1992]. Created by Laura Bainvol and Daniel Sanfeld, the Fool Moon was both a concert hall, night club and art gallery. It offered rehearsal rooms, which is rare in Brussels and important in the performing arts. The evening events (two Saturdays a month) were rarities on the Brussels club scene. The transversality of artistic disciplines and musical genres was explored. They gathered fans of rock (Andy Summers from The Police), African music (Manu Katché), South American music (the Cuban rappers, Orishas), jazz (John Scofield, Philippe Catherine), funk (Fred Wesley), classical music (Nigel Kennedy, winner of the Queen Elisabeth Music Competition), dance, song (Dick Annegarn), cabaret (Sandra Zidani, Sam Touzani, Yves Hunstad), story-telling and visual art.⁸ Audiences (often divided up according to musical genre) mingled 'New York style', enjoying the proximity of the artists.

16. At one point accused of being 'hipsters descending on the canal', the Fool Moon organisers defended themselves by presenting a programme which was open to all cultures and all audiences, including the young people from the neighbourhood who often had trouble getting into other clubs. These young people even participated in some of the



Figure 6. Concert ticket :
Bugge Wesseltoft, 21 octobre 1999.
Source: © Fool Moon.

⁶ Source: VKconcert.be website <http://www.vkconcerts.be/#/general>

⁷ Amusing description of a concert at VK in 2011, which gives a good idea of the atmosphere there <http://concerts-review.over-blog.com/article-slim-cessna-s-auto-club-the-red-light-rumors-au-vk-molenbeek-le-5-mai-2011-73364430.html>

⁸ Interview with Daniel Sanfeld by Yves Rouyet, February 2014

artistic activities, such as the project by hip hop dancers at Place Lemmens with the Aka Moon jazz musicians. In 2001, when it was at the end of its lease and no longer receiving grants, the Fool Moon closed its doors once and for all due to a neighbourhood dispute regarding disturbance of the peace.

17. In 1994, a joyful group of punks, including Eric Lemaître (guitarist from Contigent, PPZ30, who died in 2012), moved into an abandoned warehouse located at 4 Rue du Magasin in the Pentagon area. Named Magasin 4, it operated without grants and only with the help of volunteers. Despite this, the club soon became the rallying point for talented rock and punk bands which were not backed by the major record labels. Due to complaints about the noise, the concerts ended at 10.30pm, which allowed the many fans from Liège to catch the last train home.⁹

18. In 2008, after 14 years of true and loyal service and performances by more than 3500 bands, the owner decided to make a profit and threw out the Magasin 4 organisers. One year later, the phoenix rose from the ashes and occupied a former warehouse along the canal at 51 Avenue du Port, opposite Tour & Taxis.¹⁰ This was a blessing in disguise, as they now had a bigger venue, which was adjustable and had high quality acoustics. This allowed Magasin 4 to have a more ambitious programme, while preserving its vocation as a 'springboard'. As stated by one of the organisers, 'A bigger programme means bigger fees and bigger trouble.' From then on, Magasin 4 has received the support of the French Community, and has joined the 'Club Plasma' network, receiving a yearly grant of €23,000.



Figure 7. Former Magasin 4 building.
Source: © M4.

⁹ People's depictions of Magasin 4 on Yelp <http://fr.yelp.be/biz/magasin4-bruxelles?nb=1>

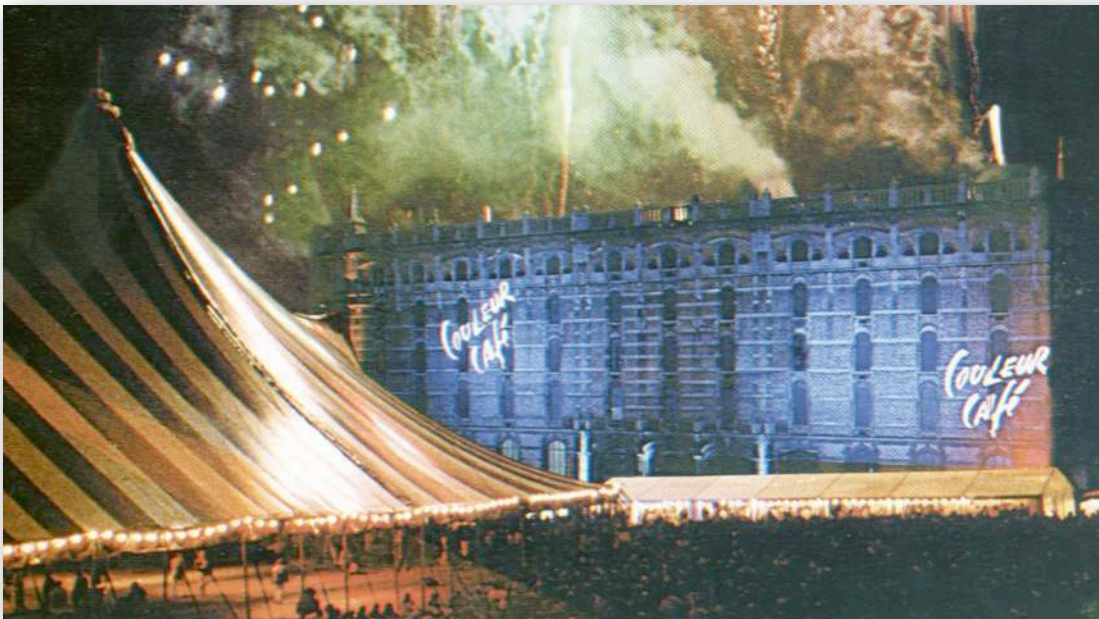
¹⁰ Interview with Magasin 4 managers at http://www.shootmeagain.com/articles/105_magasin4

3. Nightclubbing, we're nightclubbing...

19. In addition to the cultural centres and clubs, the canal area has become known for its recurrent and/or itinerant parties. For example, let us mention *Crema e gusto*¹¹ from the end of the 1990s at the Bodega, a former cleaning company in Rue de Birmingham, which was transformed into a night club by two Spanish brothers in 1998 [Bosser, 1998], and, in the 2000s, the electronica parties at Tour & Taxis.

20. The Bulex parties, initiated by Dominique Speeckaert, stood out in the area of 'alter clubbing tourism' [s.n in *Le Soir* 2012]. The concept (close to that of rave parties), was unique in Brussels in 1989: each month, the party was held in a place which was kept secret. Little stickers on benches or poles in the street gave a telephone number for

Figure 8. First *Couleur Café* festival organised at Tour & Taxis, 1994.
Source: © Thyl Beniest.



obtaining an address in a recorded message. Party-goers discovered original and extraordinary places where such events had rarely been held. These places were often along the canal. With its philosophy of openness, Bulex was able to preserve its original social values for almost half a century: 'multi-ethnicity, socio-cultural mix, no dress code and reasonable prices'. After three years of absence, the parties were taken over in 2012 by Jonathan Giacomelli, a committed ecologist (cyclists do not have to pay an entrance fee). They have become professionalised and are even exported to famous European festivals, such as the Paléo Festival in Nyon, Switzerland.

4. An urban and cosmopolitan festival

21. In a strange sort of twist of fate, it was the Swiss festival in Nyon which served as a model for another major musical event in the canal area: *Couleur Café*.¹² That is where Patrick Wallens (Zig Zag non-profit organisation) and Mirko Popovitch (La Vénérerie cultural centre and *Africalia*) discovered the concept of the festival as a crossroads for world and urban music. According to the organisers, urbanity only had meaning if the event was held in the city, at the heart of crowded and mixed neighbourhoods (unlike the trend at the time to hold such events in fields out in the country). They therefore set up the festival in 1990 at Halles de Schaerbeek, and in 1994 moved to Tour & Taxis.

22. In 20 years, the *Couleur Café* festival has gained international fame, presenting some of the biggest stars in *raï*, hip hop, soul, reggae and South American music, and recently some electronica music. It always gives special attention to Belgian bands. In 1990, the first edition was already a big success with 5300 spectators. For the 2013 edition, there were more than 80,000 people on the Tour & Taxis site, which had been transformed into a 'world' village. In addition to music, the festival also includes exhibits, food from around the world and dance classes. The village also provides NGOs which are active in development aid the possibility to make themselves known.

¹¹ Three parties in one at *Bodega* in 2006 <http://www.netevents.be/fr/soiree/63416/-3-Makes-a-crowd-by-Crema-e-Gusto-Movida-social-club-B-y-records/>

¹² History of *Couleur Café* at http://2013.couleurcafe.be/fr/couleur_cafe/historique-370.html

5. Rock and roll and musical chairs

23. With this profusion of alternative culture, it should be borne in mind that, although the traditional cultural institutions do not have a strong presence in the canal area, they are not totally absent. These essentially Flemish institutions were also influenced – and even revolutionised – by the singular characteristics of the territory: deindustrialisation, urbanity and multiculturalism.

24. KVS, Kaaaitheater, Beurschouwburg, AB-Luna, VK, De Markten, etc.: there is a high concentration of Flemish institutions in the canal area. This situation is explained by the combination of a strong political will and, once again, the availability of real estate.

25. According to Jari Demeulemeester,¹³ since the 19th century and the francisation of the city, there has been a will to safeguard, perpetuate and even intensify Flemish culture in Brussels. First there was a

municipal will, when the City of Brussels decided to create the Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg in 1883, following a popular movement. Then there was a community will in the 1960s, with the idea to create a 'cultuur en contactcentrum', i.e. a space for presenting popular Flemish culture and a hall for festivities. The emergence of community institutions (Commissie voor Vlaamse Cultuur in de Brusselse Agglomeratie in 1971, Nederlandse Cultuurcommissie in 1972 and, since 1989, Vlaams Gemeenschapscommissie) made large budgets available for the rental, purchase, renovation and operation of cultural venues.

26. From a real estate point of view, the Flemish investment led to a game of musical chairs, whereby the institutions moved from one space to another in the course of successive modernisations, unearthing original spaces along the way, used as interim venues which very often became permanent.

27. This was the case in 1955 when, after a fire, KVS moved to the former Beursschouwburg theatre (La Brasserie Flamande hall created in 1885) during renovation works. In 1964, KVS once again needed to be renovated: the government rented the Beurs once again. This time, the Secretary of State for Flemish Culture made it a requirement for KVS to make some of the space available to popular Flemish artists (it was an occasion to implement the much-discussed concept of 'cultuur en contactcentrum', a sort of gemeenschapscentrum before the term was coined).

28. In the 1970s and 80s, the Beursschouwburg started presenting theatre for young people and pop concerts. Tom Waits and U2 (during their first tour in 1981) played in the small concert hall with 350 seats. At the time, there were a lot of exchanges between the Beurs and Plan K. Due to a lack of financial means for the renovation works, the latter was having trouble maintaining an infrastructure to accommodate groups fittingly. This transfer of Plan K's concert programme to the Beurs marked a first step towards the more institutionalised world of Flemish culture.



Figure 9. U2 at the
Beursschouwburg, 10
February 1981. Source:
© Philippe Carly.

¹³ Interview with Jari Demeulemeester by Jan Ackenhaussen (ADT), February 2014.

29. Very soon, however, the Beursschouwburg became too small for the music scene. The Belgian government therefore purchased two buildings in 1977: the Botanique (which later became the well-known venue for Francophone rock) and the Ancienne Belgique. Historically, the Ancienne Belgique was oriented essentially towards French music and worked in partnership with the Olympia in Paris (with concerts by Jacques Brel and Edith Piaf). However, it became the second hub in the Flemish 'cultuur en contactcentrum' project: the concert and events hall. The concerts were transferred only nine years later from the Beursschouwburg to the Ancienne Belgique, due to delays caused by technical problems.

30. The game of musical chairs did not stop there: the AB and the Kaaithheater moved to La Luna, KVS to the Bottelarij and, in 2001, the Beursschouwburg – which had become the true hub of Flemish culture in the city centre – began renovations. Once again, a new temporary space was uncovered: the Beurs bis, a former furniture warehouse located at 37 Rue de la Caserne.

31. Located between Rue de Laeken and Quai du Commerce, in an old armoury from 1883 along the former docks, which led to the city centre from the 16th to 19th century, the Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg is the oldest cultural institution in the canal area. At the end of the 1990s, the encounter between KVS – a traditional theatre with a middle-class public – and the social and cultural reality of the neighbourhoods along the canal, was like an electric shock for this institution. In 1999, artistic director Franz Marijnen obtained funding to transform the theatre from top to bottom. A large modern auditorium had to be built in the original neo-renaissance building, which was listed and whose style was very restricting. Some of the spaces (studios, offices, rehearsal rooms, workshops and warehouses) were sent a few metres away to a new functional building at 7-9 Quai aux Pierres de Taille. The two buildings are linked by a tunnel.

32. During the long period of works from 1999 to 2004, KVS had to find an available venue for its activities. It found what it was looking for at 58 Rue Delaunoy, at the heart of historical Molenbeek: the Bottelarij. This former Vos Kina lambic brewery, transformed in 1943 into a bottling factory for Belle-Vue breweries, had just stopped its activities in

1996. The Bottelarij became a space for the creative industry; offices and studios for artists, cultural associations and the Rits (an art school) theatre department moved next to the Kleine Academie and a.pass (postgraduate school in 'advanced scenography'). Between 2001 and 2006, KVS had two temporary auditoriums there.

33. The traditional public did not follow KVS to the Bottelarij, which proved to be a relative failure. As explained by dramatist Hildegard De Vuyst, 'the founding principles of KVS were the middle-class ideals of Flemish emancipation and cultural self-determination. The refusal – due to a lack of will or daring – by the homogeneous and possibly older Flemish public to leave Flanders or the outskirts of the city to go to the "Far West" of Molenbeek marks the end of the old KVS. The foyer of the Bottelarij looks too much like a bar for it to be thought of as a bastion of Flemish culture in Brussels.' [De Vuyst, 2012].

34. Moreover, KVS was not able to attract new types of public in Brussels despite a few timid multicultural experiments, which were somewhat paternalistic and clumsy. No one escaped unharmed from this confrontation between the official Flemish cultural world and the reality of the neighbourhoods. In 2001, Marijnen resigned, exhausted, and was replaced by two young men in their twenties: director Jan Goossens and his assistant Danny Op de Beeck. KVS would never see the performing arts in the same way. Its time in the underground world of the canal area had succeeded in radically modernising the main Flemish theatre institution in Brussels. From then on, KVS stood out as a 'city theatre' with an artistic practice characterised – in its own words – by 'generosity, interconnection and super-diversity' [De Vuyst, 2012].

35. As the heir of the abundant cultural life of Boulevard d'Anvers before the war, La Luna was built in 1929-32 at Square Sainctelette, on the site of a former Luna Park. Until the 1950s, this fantastic multifunctional art deco building was the home of a variety hall. It was closed due to the noise from the Koekelberg viaduct (which was like a motorway passing in front of its first floor), and was used for a certain time by a carpet dealer. It was then totally abandoned following the underground works and was purchased in 1988 by the company Immobilière Moderne. In 1991, the Flemish Community signed a 30-year lease with the real estate company to renovate the theatre and to equip it in order



Figure 10. La Luna concert tickets: Suede, Portishead, Stone Roses, Cocteau Twins. Source: François Dubuisson and Yves Rouyet collections.

6. Networking and opening by the festivals

36. Kaaithheater asbl, was founded in 1977 in a tent set up on the old wharves behind KVS, as its name indicates [s.n in La Libre, 1979]. Hugo De Greef (from the Beurschouwburg) and Walter Moens (from the Nederlandse Commissie voor de Cultuur van de Brusselse Agglomeratie) had the idea to create a new theatre festival on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of KVS in 1977, as a reaction to the more traditional theatre still produced in this major institution. In 1979, for their second edition, the two protagonists took advantage of the momentum of the Brussels millennium to organise an international contemporary theatre festival including 19 companies from 11 countries, presenting 55 performances in 10 different venues, such as KVS, the Beurschouwburg and Theatre 140. In addition to the big names in contemporary theatre such as Bob Wilson, the performance directed by Salvador Tavora – founder of the Spanish group La Cuadra de Sevilla – left an impact. His staging of working-class Spanish immigrants in Brussels highlighted their condition and the problems they faced.

37. From 1985, the Kaai was located in the former L'Etoile brewery (1850-1957) in Rue Notre-Dame du Sommeil, purchased in 1984 by

the artists' association Schaamte. Schaamte and the Kaai, which had been closely linked since the beginning of their activities, merged in 1988. The institution soon found itself in the narrow Rue Notre-Dame du Sommeil, with its own programme of very well-known artists in contemporary dance (Jan Fabre, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker), theatre (Wooster Group NY, Josse De Pauwe), performance and classical music. It therefore returned to the canal and moved into La Luna, which was renamed Kaaithheater in 2001. From that point, the original building was called 'Kaaistudio's', and has been used for rehearsals and productions requiring a smaller capacity.¹⁴



Figure 11. Press conference with Wooster Group (with actor Willem Dafoe on the right) and Hugo Degreef, Kaaithheater director, 1996. Source: © Kaaithheater.

¹⁴ <http://www.kaaitheater.be/fr/p252/batiments>

38. As the Kaai now had two beautiful locations, the theatre festival was less spread out throughout the city. However, BRONKS was often called upon.

39. BRONKS (acronym for BRussel ONderwijs KunSt) is an arts centre founded in 1991 by Oda Van Neygen,¹⁵ the head of Beurschouwburg's young people's theatre, with a theatre programme and workshops for children and adolescents. After 17 years of nomadic existence, BRONKS has had its own space since 2009 in Rue Marché-aux-Porcs.



Figure 12. 1981 Kaai-theaterfestival poster, design by Ever Meulen. Source: © Plaizier.

40. At the same time, since 1994, another multidisciplinary contemporary art festival has emerged in Brussels: the KunstenFESTIVALdesArts. Created and run until 2006 by the former director of the Singel in Antwerp, Frie Leysen, this festival is meant to be urban, cosmopolitan and bilingual [Duplat, 2005]. It seeks funding from both communities, which is very rare in the context of Belgian cultural institutions, as well as being arduous. As an example of the authentic bi-community identity of the project, since 2007, French speaker Christophe Slagmuylder has been at the helm of a ship which the French Community finds a bit too Flemish. The Kunst has mobilised the main venues and institutions in the canal area dedicated to the performing arts: Beurschouwburg (as its central point), De Markten, Tour & Taxis, La Luna, the Bottelarij, La Bellone, the Raffinerie, Kaaistudio's, etc. Furthermore, live performances have been organised in cultural venues which are usually dedicated to the visual arts, such as dance performances in Le Comptoir du Nylon in 2005, for example. Finally, totally off-the-wall places have

been discovered and used, such as the car park in Rue de Flandre where a film was shown in 2001.¹⁶

7. The legacy

41. The canal's underground vocation continues today: the K-nal club located in Avenue du Port has succeeded in selling lunch to the KB staff during the day and in dedicating its space to electronic music in the evening. Generally speaking, the canal area remains a Mecca for dance clubs and live music: Madame Moustache¹⁷ along Quai aux Bois à Brûler; Mister Wong,¹⁸ since 2011 in Rue de la Vierge Noire; Magic Mirror, at Tour & Taxis; and Les ateliers Claus,¹⁹ since 2006 in Rue de Brabant.

42. In the 2000s, the most loyal heir of the underground artistic approach in the canal area was without a doubt La Compilothèque,²⁰ an old disused bar along Quai des Péniches, which admirably filled the niche left by its predecessors. The place was run by fanatics, presenting very particular alternative concerts. Due to the lack of an adequate communication strategy, it was difficult to know about their activities. It was closed in 2013, and some of its activities were continued at La Parfumerie,²¹ a squat located at Porte de Ninove with a space for concerts and parties.

¹⁵ http://www.bronks.be/page.jsp?ref=over_mission

¹⁶ All of the KFA programmes since 1998 were analysed in order to make an inventory of cultural venues.

¹⁷ <http://www.madamemoustache.be/>

¹⁸ http://visitbrussels.be/bitc/BE_fr/nightclub/8063/mister-wong.do

¹⁹ <http://www.lesateliersclaus.com/archive2013>

²⁰ Lise Nakhlé's account (ADT)

²¹ Read the well-written description of a party at La Parfumerie at <http://www.matamore.net/agenda/index.php?cookie=2&year=2013&month=08&day=27&categorie=&navigation=&limit>

43. Since 2007, La Chocolaterie²² has continued the tradition of re-covering abandoned industrial buildings. The multipurpose spaces in the former Neuhaus chocolate factory in Rue Van Malder in Molenbeek are available to artists and event organisers.

44. In 2011, The Egg²³ did the same thing in Cureghem, by converting an industrial building in Rue Bara (used until 2000 as a workshop and central storage for La Monnaie) into a multiplex with the clear intention to be a place for the encounter between culture, media and business. The theatre company La Comédie de Bruxelles, directed by actor and stage director Daniel Hanssens, is in residence at The Egg.

45. In the category of 'avant-gardist theatres', let us mention the Flemish cooperative Alibi,²⁴ a nomadic theatre laboratory located since 1993 at 323 Rue du Progrès in Schaerbeek, in a former sweetener factory renamed 'Flavoria' and, the Walloon cooperative ZUT (Zone Urbaine Théâtre), created in 2004 [Ancion, 2004] and dissolved in 2010 [Perotti, 2010], whose stage in Rue Ransfort in Molenbeek was an important springboard.

8. The canal: 'so close, yet so far away'

46. The analysis of the location of cultural venues in the canal area over the past decades highlights spatiality and temporality in three periods.

47. The first period was that of the major institutions along the western fringe of the Pentagon, in particular along the former port area which once entered the city in the northwest. Paradoxically, although these more institutional places are located close to the canal, they turn their back on it. KVS, Beursschouwburg and Théâtre National are institutions which operate according to the logic of a city centre, with its major boulevards. It should however be noted that a small concentration

of cultural venues appeared around KVS, including various small theatres such as the Garagetheater and the Waltratheater.

48. From the 1970s to the mid 1990s, cultural operators discovered the areas around the canal and took advantage of them, in particular in terms of image. But these areas were chosen for their 'waterfront' location, and the neighbourhoods and their inhabitants were ignored. At this time, the development of a hub to the west of the canal around Porte de Ninove was taking shape. Only the VK, located at Parvis Saint-Jean Baptiste, carried out any long-term cultural and social action as a gemeenschapcentrum at the heart of historical Molenbeek.

49. The 1990s were marked by the discovery by institutions, operators and the public of a social reality in the neighbourhoods surrounding the canal. ZUT, the Bottelarij, Kaaistudio's, etc. were more clearly rooted in the working-class neighbourhoods. Fool Moon, Bodega and Couleur Café had a more mixed programme. The discourses and approaches dealt with the urban question and multiculturalism. The institutions attempted – sometimes with difficulty and not only at cultural level – to create ties with the inhabitants in the neighbourhood. For example, the former fabric shop La Tentation in Rue de Laeken was converted into a cultural venue by the Spanish community in 1997. The huge space has a capacity for more than 1000 people, and gradually became a favourite location for other foreign communities in Brussels. Along with its cultural activities, La Tentation works with the non-profit association Cosmos, a training and employment centre in the area of catering services. In addition, the VK hires its staff (bar, security, technical) from the Rue Ransfort neighbourhood. But it still has a relatively homogeneous public from other neighbourhoods.

²² <http://www.la-chocolaterie.be/>

²³ <http://www.eggbrussels.eu/>

²⁴ http://www.alibicollectief.be/index_fr.htm

Conclusion

50. 'Manchester', 'Birmingham' and 'Anvers': these street names are a reminder of the period of industrial and port activity in the canal area which, like the cities they pay tribute to, was an extraordinary underground artistic laboratory for nearly 40 years, full of discovery and success. Throughout the canal area, cultural venues emerged, thanks to volunteers motivated by a social ideal and/or a passion for creation. These places represented a chance for the people of Brussels to see international artists in an intimate setting, and were an experimental crossroads between artistic disciplines: music, dance, visual art, etc.

51. The cultural operators in the canal area benefited from a favourable context in several ways. Firstly, deindustrialisation had made exceptional sites available at affordable prices. Secondly, there was a will on behalf of the subsidising authority from the Flemish Community to support Flemish cultural initiatives in Brussels. Finally, there was a relatively slow gentrification process in Brussels (in this area in particular), unlike what has been observed in other European and American cities, where abandoned port areas have been converted in a more rapid and even drastic manner. The real estate situation, which was limited for a long time, allowed artistic activities to develop in the canal area, sometimes creating ties with local populations with low sociocultural capital and often of foreign origin, not without great difficulty and, sometimes, resounding failure.

52. This phenomenon is not unique to Brussels. In New York and London, for example, artists have often been accused of being – despite themselves – the Trojan horse of gentrification, which, once under way, soon chases them away. This responsibility is brought into perspective by various authors [Davis, 2013]. Tatiana Debroux points out that the residential movements of artists occurred at the same time as the sociological transformation of central neighbourhoods at the beginning of the 2000s [Debroux, 2013]. As regards the performing arts in the canal area, we have shown that the movement seems to have begun at the end of the 1970s, was more pronounced at the beginning of

the 1990s, and became institutionalised and even more marked at the turn of the millennium. We may therefore maintain that it precedes the arrival of artists and the renewed interest in these neighbourhoods.

53. In the canal area, many cultural initiatives have survived thanks to professionalisation, institutionalisation and the purchase of the venues they use (either themselves or their subsidising authority). Over time, these old warehouses – transformed into cultural centres – have been renovated, equipped and modernised; the festivals have expanded and have become more famous.

54. Today, real estate prices are increasing and the number of development projects is growing: development of the Tour & Taxis site, Up-Site housing tower being finished by Atenor, conversion of the postal building into housing by AG Real Estate at Bassin Béco, City Docks mixed project by Atenor at Bassin de Biestebroek, and many smaller residential changes. However, having had the time to become institutionalised, to obtain the finances for renovating the buildings they use and possibly to become owners, some of the cultural venues from the 'pioneer' period are probably less at risk of being forced to move to other areas of the city due to real estate dynamics.

55. More symbolically, the identification with the canal has grown to the point that artists and venues (major institutions and more private spaces) have formed the network Plateforme Kanal,²⁵ which organises a festival with the same name. Today there is a high density of cultural activities in the west of the Pentagon area, in Molenbeek and in Cureghem. This density is on the whole recent in the cultural history of Brussels, and to a large extent constitutes a hiatus with regard to the socioeconomic status of the majority of the inhabitants of the neighbourhoods concerned. And finally, the event Molenbeek, capitale culturelle de la Communauté française en 2014 (Molenbeek, 2014 cultural capital of the French Community), which may have seemed absurd, makes sense in the light of this recent history.

²⁵ <http://www.platformkanal.be/>

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